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ABSTRACT

This speech, a product of the workshop on "Media: Minorities and Sex Stereotyping", is said to be intended to provide a vivid picture of how to write about minorities for minority youth from a "white" point of view. The author attributes his success in writing to the conviction that race is no factor in the dimensions of human joys and despairs, and emphasizes his responsibility toward the reader and the ethnic group written about, regardless of whether he himself is of the same ethnic group or an outsider writing about it. Various specifications said to apply to any good novel for young readers are made: length of 125 to 180 pages, a high excitement level, the use of humor wherever possible, and utilization of mostly inner city characters, background, and setting. The characters and backgrounds used are said to be most important in the creation of minority books used to "turn-on" reluctant readers of various colors and races. (AM)

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WHITE LIKE ME: Experiences in Writing For Minority Youth

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WHITE LIKE ME: EXPERIENCES IN WRITING FOR MINORITY YOUTH

Workshop Proceedings
December 3-4, 1975

Coordinated by:
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Maryland State Department of Education
Division of Library Development and Services
School Media Office
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INTRODUCTION

With the upsurge of interest in the teaching of ethnic studies, media supervisors, media specialists, public librarians, and other concerned personnel are looking for positive ways to relate to different group identities. One consistent request is for adequate print and nonprint materials. The primary objective in the selection of instructional materials is to implement, enrich, and support the educational programs of the schools. This necessitates a wide range of instructional materials on all levels of difficulty and with diversity of appeal as well as the presentation of different points of view in a pluralistic society.

Authors are now making a conscious effort to portray every segment of our population honestly and sincerely. Mr. Frank Bonham, who spoke at the workshop, "Media: Minorities and Sex Stereotyping," on December 3-4, 1974, gave us a very vivid picture of how he goes about writing about minorities from a "white" point of view. He feels that whether the author is part of the ethnic group or an outsider writing about it, he has the same responsibility toward the group and the reader. The responsibility demands a knowledge of the subject matter, imagination, truthfulness, and, above all, an understanding.

Mr. Bonham's speech which follows should broaden the scope of every person who has the responsibility to develop media collections and programs which truly reflect the multiethnic nature of their community.

WHITE LIKE ME: Experiences in Writing for Minority Youth

Frank Bonham

The Golden Text for my sermon today is from a book by Peter de Vries called LET ME COUNT THE WAYS. It's ten lines long, and I'd better read it to you so I'll get it straight. A young boy is telling a story to his family.

> *There was this black missionary who had a congregation of converts in the African jungle. So once some ministers from America who were travelling in the Congo came to visit his church of thatch and straw, and all during the service the members of the congregation kept turning around to look at them. They had never seen white people before. So finally the missionary— he was preaching— stopped in his sermon and said to the congregation, 'Never mind them. Their skins may be white, but their souls are just as black as yours.'*

Any success I've had with my books for minority readers stems from my conviction that human joys and despairs are basically all the same color. Losing a job, finding one's true love, or writing a poem feels about the

same in any part of town, I think. If this weren't true, how could I have fooled so many inner-city kids into reading my books? They would have suspected that I was the wrong color, and, therefore, didn't feel the same way they did about the important things. Surely, they would have caught onto me by now.

A teacher in a junior high school in Watts told me about a non-reader named Nathanael. Nathanael saw a book on her desk named DURANGO STREET. He was surprised to see a group of black kids on the cover. He asked if he could take the book home and read it.

Evangeline Smith, the teacher, told him, "No. You'd never bring it back, Nathanael, and the school board has asked me to read and review the book, as a black person, to see whether or not it's acceptable."

"Can I stay after school and read it?" Nathanael asked.

"You can stay after school," Mrs. Smith said, "but I don't know whether or not you can read it. I'd certainly like to see you try."

Nathanael skipped the hard words, and found he knew the kids in the book even if he hadn't met them. And he recognized the ratty palm trees and cracked sidewalks of his part of town as well as the problems of the hero, Rufus Henry.

For three days Nathanael stayed after school to read the book. And that weekend, Mrs. Smith let him take it home. But he didn't bring it back. He'd loaned it to a friend and the friend brought it back a couple of days later.

From DURANGO STREET, Nathanael was artfully moved to some other books with minority heroes, although there weren't many at that time. That was 1965, and the philosophy for teaching reading was that black kids lacked the power to read, and that white kids wouldn't read about black kids. But Mrs. Smith managed to make a reader out of Nathanael, and a few months later he almost flunked his shop course because he'd been caught too many times reading a book while pounding on a piece of tin.

I don't need to tell a group like you that you can't win every round in the teaching of reading. I know there are times when you're convinced you can't win any of them. The kids who want to read *will* read; the kids who don't, *won't*. But inside nearly every boy's or girl's head, I think, lies a reading nerve, and if you succeed in touching it, like a brain surgeon, he or she is going to say, "Wow! What was that?" And the first thing you know, that child is asking where they give out the library cards.

In some ways, the task is a little easier than it was in 1965, the year of the Watts riots, because that was the year librarians and teachers began asking publishers for books with minority interest, and publishers began asking writers. In a short time, we had novels which had changed color in mid-stream, so that there were black children in them whose fathers were bankers in Birmingham; and black dentists with white Midwest practices.

But after the kids and educators had laughed these books back into the bins, something that you might really call a *minority book* evolved. I suppose literature, like music, should be color-blind; but literature in this country, unfortunately, started out mainly white. Now we have had a solid literary genre with minority protagonists, and kids often write me to ask how-come I write them.

How-come is because I felt there was a need for them, at least as books to turn-on inner city kids like Nathanael. Ironically, my minority books

are now widely used as turn-on books for reluctant readers of whatever color or race.

I don't write such books quite as mechanically as you would build a house, but I probably do have a set of specifications. These specifications would include the following:

Length — about 125 to 180 pages.
Excitement level — high.
Characters — mostly inner city.
Background and settings — largely the same.
Humor — where possible.

These specifications apply to any good novel for young readers. It's the characters and backgrounds that make the difference.

When I blundered onto the idea for DURANGO STREET, I knew it was going to mean a long season of research before I started to write. I can't tap my way through a story with a red and white cane, blind to the subject, so I usually have to go out and inform myself.

In this case, I spent a year and a half in part-time research. I visited police stations, playgrounds, schools, welfare recipients' homes, mental institutions, honor camps, summer camps, and welfare and social agencies of many types. It wasn't all pleasant, and it wasn't easy, especially for me, because I forgot facts about as fast as I learned them.

So I made notes, and I transcribed them onto 4 x 6 file cards. I had hundreds of these cards before I finished the work on DURANGO STREET, and I've gone on making notes, and transcribing them, until I have, I believe, San Diego's largest collection of unrelated facts. I have notes about men, women, boys, girls, hangovers, the weather, dentures, bus fumes, and— but let me read a few of them, starting with *CHARACTERS*....

One of the characters boys and girls most often mention in their letters to me is an old black man I've used in several books, whom I call "Breathing Man." "Breathing Man" was inspired by recollections of my father....

DIALOGUE is very important in stories, of course, and I jot down good bits of speech, locutions, and bright sayings of drunks....

When I'm casting a story, I sometimes go through the cards to find characters to play certain parts. Sometimes the characters are already there waiting to go onstage.

I found Henry Crowfoot, the hero of a book called CHIEF, in a Parolee House in San Diego where I did volunteer work for several years. Chief was really two boys: A Sioux Indian who was not a parolee but used Parolee House as a crash pad, and an Arizona Indian boy the other kids called Chief, who was the hereditary chief of a band of 87 Indians.

I found Rufus Henry living in the basement of my mind when I was ready to go on DURANGO STREET. He was a blend of boys I'd met during the long season of research. Cool Hankins, the lead in two of my books, was put together from recollections of various boys I have known. He started out as a quasi-villain. Editors have always told me that they liked my villains better than my heroes, and, in this case, I found I was much more interested in Cool Hankins than I was in his straight friends.

The character of Speedy Noon, The COOL CAT, was another Parolee House resident. Speedy received Aid to the Totally Disabled because of his

drug habit, and rather than being fast-moving, as his name implied, he was half-asleep most of the time. Yet somehow he was always well-dressed and prosperous and even loaned money to his friends at exorbitant rates of interest.

Even his parole officer couldn't figure out how he managed his little stipend so well. But a customs officer at the border figured it out one night when he found 2,000 stumblers in "jars" stuffed inside his shirt. Speedy looked so innocent that no one had ever bothered to search him before.

There are traps in writing minority books, and I've fallen into all of them at one time or another. According to some authorities, I spend all my time in them. A couple of years ago *all* my books were taken off an important reading list. This was because my ghetto was too squalid. Another reviewer criticized my ghetto as being too unrealistically clean. My dialogue, according to the experts, seems to echo both Amos and Andy and Cyril Ritchard. The criticism that always makes me mad, and fortunately hasn't been made very often, is that I am always bringing in The Man to solve problems when those dumb minority characters have "carpentered" themselves into a closet. It just doesn't happen to fit the facts.

Activists naturally give me the most trouble. The Brown Berets put me on their most-wanted list for my book, VIVA CHICANO. The only consolation was that they had placed an even higher price on the head of Richard Valdez, who wrote CHICANO. (Activists should write books - that kids will read.)

But even the activists can't keep kids from reading. I do get fan mail, so I know somebody's reading out there. But I also know there are thousands of kids out there who *aren't* reading - not anything - and I am as concerned about it as you are. How do you teach them to read? This is an area where my expertise is very slight. Holding the reader's attention in a book is very different from holding it in a classroom. I realize this difference every time I speak to a group in an inner-city school— or any other school, for that matter.

In the first place, they lay traps for you. It never fails. I've run into everything but trapdoors under the lectern. Last month there was a tumbling class going on in half the room while I spoke to the other half.

Last spring I was asked to address a journalism class in Memorial Junior High in San Diego, and also a class of low-achievers, since I was going to be there anyway.

I spoke to the low achievers first. That mysterious Van Allen belt of interest seemed to radiate from them to me. They were absorbed in the subject and fascinated by the fact that I'd never held a job. For a few minutes I was Mr. Wonderful, probably because I'd found a way to support myself without, apparently, working. After my talk I signed all the scraps of paper in the room, and when they ran out, the kids began offering me their forearms to autograph!

Then the bell rang and Round Two started. They herded in the Journalism class, a sleepy and sullen group who looked as through they were being brought to the library to have shots. Some of them immediately settled down quite openly to sleep. In desperation, I passed around my original cover art for COOL CAT, which is a wooden model of a cross-section of a beehive, with a real pill in every cell. They even nodded over

this, a gimmick which ordinarily wakes the dead in such classes. Finally I asked:

"Are you kids really interested in writing?"

"No man," they said.

"Then why are you taking journalism?"

You know the answer already, and I know it now. "Because it's an easy course," they said.

I got another surprise in Hollenbeck Heights Junior High in Los Angeles. I've done research in that area for several books. Joseph Wambaugh worked as a police officer in Hollenbeck before he wrote THE NEW CENTURIONS. The teachers had worked out a program for the 122 worst students in the school, and they used VIVA CHICANO as a text because the school population was nearly 100 percent Mexican-American.

The kids recognized the streets, taco stands, the Dry Wash, the police station, and they wondered why someone had used their neighborhood as a stage for a book. The teacher who headed the program asked me to come to Los Angeles and tell the kids about my research on the book. I agreed.

Since I was just getting over laryngitis, I asked that the program be held in a small room, with a microphone if possible. But they led me to the library, which was about the size and shape of a train station. There was no mike and there were 100 restless kids. They spilled my glass of water over my notes, their shoes kept dropping, and kids were sent to the office for being rude to the guards, also known as teachers. As I stood in the middle of the room, I had to keep swivelling my head back and forth, speaking first to this half of the audience, then to the other.

After the disaster, they asked me to speak again, this time in a classroom. The audience would comprise some *real* behavioral problems, kids who hadn't qualified for the assembly. I was hoarse and disgusted, but what could I do?

To my surprise, the kids were lively and alert and curious. They wanted to know what was so interesting about kids like them, that I had written about their lives? They even thought they recognized some of the characters, like Brother Fernie. They made notes and asked for my autograph. They had me write my name on the chalkboard, beside the magic words: DO NOT ERASE.

Afterwards I tried to understand what the difference had been between the two groups. The obvious difference was size. I think most people tend to drown in crowds. They don't ask questions even if they have something to ask. The message here is probably reducible to a single word: Money. Classroom size was the key, I think, but the small classes too often are composed of the so-called "gifted" students, while the slow learners and problem kids wind up in larger groups.

But I've picked up a few intriguing ideas in schools and libraries where I've given talks. Nothing very startling, nevertheless, but interesting to me.

A librarian told me that reluctant readers should be encouraged and permitted to read practically anything. It's a mistake, he told me, for the English or reading teacher to try to help the history teacher by suggesting historical material or to help the science teacher by handing out A CHILD'S LIFE OF THOMAS EDISON. He pushes things like the Guinness Book of Records. One boy not only read the book, but set a record for standing on one leg. Books with lots of pictures are in demand.

especially collections of old movie shots. Kung Fu books are big. Animal books are popular, except, believe it or not, when they're about horses. Horses must simply be beyond the dreams of poor youngsters.

Another librarian told me that she can often get a reluctant reader to check out a book from the New Books section. The kids all hate dog-eared books.

Horror books are extremely popular, and students in Southeast San Diego will ditch school and read horror books all day in the library. Across the room, some Chicano children who don't read much English may be devouring comic books in Spanish.

This touches on a problem that hangs over libraries and classrooms like a wrecking ball. Sooner or later it demolishes most of the borderline readers. The problem is that the student's reading ability can't keep pace with his interests. I realize this isn't new, and we have the high-low books, of which my own books are one type. But apparently there are too few books which successfully link ability and interest. In a short time, the kids get discouraged and give up.

I am pleased that I have rescued a few of these borderline readers with my Dogtown novels. I think they're successful because they deal with problems, characters, and backgrounds familiar to inner city youth. But how about the Beverly Cleary books, which are amazingly popular in West Coast ghettoes? You can't get any whiter and more suburban than Henry Huggins and what about the Guinness book, and Charlie and the Chocolate Factory, two more winners?

It seems to come down to the patience and creativity of the educator or librarian. And these qualities are summed up, as my presentation is, by the story of an unknown librarian in the town of Richland, Washington. She was apparently determined to handle sex books properly.

A young mother, who wrote about the matter to *Saturday Review*, was looking for a book on sex for her daughter. Being a knowledgeable person, she first checked the card catalogue. But there was only one card listed under SEX. It read:

"FOR SEX, SEE LIBRARIAN."

A month or two later, the same lady decided to check the card catalogue again and see if things had changed, and the public was going to be let in on the secret. Evidently the librarian had learned something in the meantime, because while there was still only one card, it was a new one. The new card said:

"FOR SEX, ASK AT DESK."